

A Report on the 2006 ISSP Non-Response Survey

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Introduction

Survey or unit non-response is a major component of total survey error (Groves and Couper, 1998; Smith, 2005) and non-response has been rising over time in most countries (de Heer, 1999; de Heer and Israeals, 1992; de Leeuw and de Heer, 2002; Groves and Couper, 1998; Smith, 1995; Synodinos and Yamada, 2000). Many studies have examined the causes of non-response and tested procedures for reducing it (e.g. Arzheimer and Klein, 1999; de Leeuw and Hox, 2004; Diaz de Rada, 2001a, 2001b; Dillman, 2000; Groves and Couper, 1998; Groves, Dillman, Eltinge, and Little, 2002; Singer, Van Hoewyk, and Maher, 1998; Wattiner, et al., 1996).

Among the many studies of non-response, a sub-set have examined cross-national differences in response rates (Couper and de Leeuw, 2003; de Heer, 1999; de Heer and Israeals, 1992; de Leeuw and de Heer, 2002; Groves and Couper, 1998; Hox and de Leeuw, 2002; Johnson, et al., 2002; Stoop, 2005). They have documented that there are appreciable differences in non-response rates across countries. These differences relate to four factors: 1) differences in laws (e.g. some government surveys being mandatory in some countries, but not others; legal restrictions on using certain records for sampling, privacy regulations), 2) differences in study design (e.g. target population, respondent selection procedure, mode, survey content, field period, use of incentives), 3) differences in interviewing staff (e.g. experience, demographic composition, attitudes and behaviors of, training and supervision of), and 4) survey-climate (i.e. general social values relating to surveys in particular or survey-related norms such as cooperativeness, privacy expectations, trust in others).¹

International Social Survey Program Non-Response Survey (ISSP-NRS)

This paper extends understanding of cross-national differences in response rates by focusing on the second and third of these factors, differences in study design and interviewers. In the Fall of 2006 a study was launched asking about practices related to non-response in surveys carried out as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP)(see www.issp.org). The ISSP is a cross-national collaboration that has conducted annual surveys since 1985. ISSP surveys are probability samples of adults in each respective country. The ISSP Non-Response Committee asked all ISSP members to complete a questionnaire via email or by accessing a web-site (see Appendix: ISSP Non-Response Questionnaire). A total of 38 responses were obtained from 38 of the 39 active ISSP members.² Specific questions were directed towards the most

¹ Another reason for differences in reported response rates is inconsistencies in calculating these. For the procedures used by the American Association for Public Opinion Research and the World Association for Public Opinion Research, see Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates in Survey at www.aapor.org/pdfs/standarddefs_4.pdf See also, Lynn, Beerten, Laiho, and Martin, 2001.

² The ISSP countries participating in the survey were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Korea (South), Latvia, Mexico, the

recent ISSP survey they had conducted and more general questions were based on ISSP and other major, general-population surveys that the ISSP members have carried out. In 29 countries data collection used face-to-face interviewing and in 9 countries postal surveys were conducted. Much of the analysis examines these two modes separately.

Table 1 shows procedures that were used to increase response rates (mostly in face-to-face surveys). Only one procedure, call backs, is used by almost all countries (83%). Most (62%) used call backs for both refusal conversion and to contact respondents, but 17% used them only for non-contacts. Letters, booklets, or other printed materials are left with respondents when no contact is made by 59% and an introductory letter or booklet was mailed to respondents before an initial, face-to-face contact was attempted by 45%. Interviewer bonuses were utilized by 45%. 24% employed interviewer bonuses for meeting a target number of completed cases, 24% for taking difficult assignments, 10% for converting refusals, and 7% for some other reason. 31% used an introductory telephone call before an initial, face-to-face contact. 28% used converters (i.e. “specially trained or expert interviewers...to work temporary refusals”), but just 17% of them did so frequently. Lastly, 26% of surveys used respondent incentives. Of those using respondent incentives, 30% offered them only selectively, not to everyone, 80% provided the same incentive to everyone offered an incentive, and 50% gave only gifts as an incentive and the rest combined gifts with cash incentives (Table 2). The gifts given ranged notably from country-to-country and included flowers, chocolate bars, postage stamps, gas cards, rail vouchers, manicure sets, umbrellas, and a prize in a lottery among respondents. Finally, 56% of those using incentives offered them upon first contact, while others used them later on more as a converting device (Table 2).

Summing across the seven techniques in Table 1, in face-to-face surveys no organization used all seven techniques, 6 of the procedures were used by 10% of the countries, 4-5 by 31%, 3 by 28%, 2 by 21%, 1 by 3% and none by 7%.

Two techniques were used to assess what procedures were considered as most effective in achieving the best-possible, response rate in face-to-face surveys. First, an open-ended question asked what were “the most effective strategies or tactics for maximizing your response rate.” As Table 3 shows, interviewer training led the list with 11 mentions. Also, involving interviewers were interviewer supervision (6 mentions), experienced interviewers (5 mentions), interviewer bonuses (4 mentions), better interviewer pay (2 mentions), using converters (1 mention), and good interviewer behavior (1 mention). Respondent incentives tied for first place with 11 mentions. Other field procedures included using call backs (4 mentions), handouts and letters (4 mentions), the timing of contacts (3 mentions), advanced letters (3 mentions), longer field periods (3 mentions), making calls to schedule interviews (2 mentions), and in-personal interviewing in general (1 mention). Survey design aspects included having shorter questionnaires (5 mentions), interesting content (4 mentions), and better/simpler questions (1 mention). Overall, interviewers were involved in 42% of the mentions, field procedures 43% of the time, design features 14%, and miscellaneous 1%.

Second, a closed-ended item asked how useful certain procedures were to “achieve a high

Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

response rate.” Table 4 shows that more experienced interviewers were seen as most helpful (72% very useful). This was followed by more interviewer training (45%), shorter questionnaires (45%), supervision of interviewers (35%), letters and booklets (31%), interviewer bonuses (31%), more call backs (29%), longer field periods (28%), respondent incentives (28%), and using converters (17%). Incentives, bonuses, and converters were rated low in part because they were not employed by most countries (55-74%). If one examines their ratings among those using each procedure, the ratings of incentives (57%) and converters (38%) are appreciably greater, but those using interviewer bonuses rate these as less effective than non-users do (23% vs. 38%).

The two approaches cover somewhat different ground. The open-ended item obviously can cover topics not mentioned among the listed procedures. This difference is most apparent with the references to interviewer behavior which was not covered by the list. Other such examples include timing of contacts, content of studies, better pay, etc. The approaches agree on the importance of experience, training, and supervising interviewers which rank at or near the top in both instances. The two most apparent disagreements are that the open-ended items emphasizes interviewer training more than experience, while the closed-ended item reverses this and the open-ended item gives higher placement to respondent incentives than the closed-ended item does.

An open-ended question asked for a description of the “training that interviewers received to help them in making contacts, gaining cooperation, and converting temporary refusals.” While much rich information was obtained, its contents varied greatly from country-to-country. Almost all countries mentioned training sessions, but only six give the length of training (from 12 hours to 3 days). After formal training sessions, the most frequently cited aspect was supervising the work of interviewers. This included such procedures as having supervisors or experienced interviewers accompanying new interviewers into the field, weekly reports, and monitoring of the outcome of each and every interviewer assignment. Next most often mentioned was that many interviewers had prior experience. Also mentioned were practice interviews.

Two specific approaches to train interviewers about were then asked about: Tailoring (“Training interviewers to tailor approaches; that is, varying each request to emphasize points that they believe will be most persuasive to each individual respondent”) and Establishing Rapport (“Training Interviewers to develop rapport with each respondent, that is, a friendly connection or affinity between each other”). Both were rated as highly and equality valuable as means to increase response rates. Tailoring was considered as Very Important by 68% and Somewhat Important by 29% and Rapport as Very Important by 64% and Somewhat Important by 32%.

As Table 5 shows, there is considerable spread in the type of people employed as interviewers. Averaging across countries, part-time professionals make up 51%, full-time professionals are 26%, students are 22%, and others are less than 1%. However, the actual mix of interviewer types varies greatly across countries with about a fifth of the countries using no part-time professionals and almost a quarter employing all part-timers. Likewise, over two-fifths of all countries have no full-time professionals, while over a fifth have full-timers making up half or more of their staff. Similarly, almost two-fifths of countries use no student interviewers, while over a fifth have a majority of interviewers who are students. These differences reflect the affiliations of the ISSP members (e.g. whether university-based or not), whether or not they have their own field staff or sub-contract with others, national labor-force conditions, local traditions,

and other matters.

For postal surveys, a major variable involving the level of effort and thus affecting the response rate is the number of mailed contacts. These average 4 and range from 2 to 7. In all but one country there is a combination of re-sending questionnaires and mailing reminders (usually postcards). There are also differences in the intervals between mailings, but typically they are about one to two weeks. Another approach for increasing postal response is to adopt a mixed-mode design using telephone and/or in-person contacts along with the mailings to increase response. As Table 6 indicates, some telephone follow-up is used in 38% of the postal surveys and 3% even conduct some interviews via the phone. None use in-person contacts.

Of course, nonresponse is not only just one component of total survey error, but reducing error is just one goal in conducting surveys. To judge the relative importance assigned to dealing with nonresponse rather than other goals, a hypothetical item asked, "If you had additional resources to devote to your surveys, which of the following would you spend it on..." As Table 7 shows, the top choice with 42% saying it would be their "top priority" was More Analysis. Higher Response Rates was a close second with 37%. These were followed by Large Sample Size (29%), More Methodological Experiments, More Questionnaire Development/Pretesting (18%), Doing More Surveys (16%), and Longer Surveys (5%).

While increasing response rates receives a relatively high priority for the allocation of additional resources, most do not think that even having additional resources would make it easy to increase response rates. Just 10.5% say an increase would be Very Easy, 26% that it would be Easy, 53% that it would still be Difficult, and 10.5% that it would be Very Difficult.

Summary and Conclusion

On both face-to-face and postal ISSP surveys there is considerable variation across countries in the procedures used to collect data. Sometimes different techniques are used (or not used) because of different judgments about their utility. This most clearly shows up in different ratings of the effectiveness of various procedures for enhancing response rates as indicated by both the open- and closed-ended questions on this issue. In other cases the differences probably reflect variation in organizational and/or national practices. That is, countries tend to do what they are used to doing. Of course countries would often want to do more, but lack the resources to increase efforts or implement additional procedures.

It would be desirable to relate survey procedures to outcomes (especially response rates). However, one needs to be cautious in this regard. First, the variation in design features across countries does not represent randomized treatments. Countries that use more procedures (e.g. incentives, bonuses, more mailings) may employ these because interviewing is more difficult in their countries. Thus, if difficult conditions lead to more efforts, then those countries undertaking greater efforts may not have higher response rates. They would, however, presumably have higher response rates than if they did not employ the additional procedures.

Second, it is widely believed, and existing research tends to support the theory, that "survey climate" varies across countries (de Heer and Moritz, 1997; Groves and Couper, 1992; 1998; Harkness, 1999; Stoop, 2004). "Survey climate" has been conceptualized as "societal-level conditions that facilitate or mitigate survey participation in a particular society" (Groves and Couper, 1998, p. 155) and as "public willingness to participate in surveys" (Harkness, 1999). But

without some survey-independent data directly measuring aspects of survey climate, it will be hard to sort out cross-national differences due to survey procedures and other factors from those resulting from socio-cultural factors related to “survey climate”.

One should not rely on designs that assume that whatever differences exist in response rates after survey methods have been standardized are the result of “survey climate”. Any resorting to a residual approach for establishing a relationship is inherently indirect, imprecise, and uncertain. First, true standardization of design and level of effort is very difficult to actually achieve across countries (Philippens and Billiet, 2004; Stoop, 2005). Even a high degree of apparent similarity on design and execution will contain a great deal of actual differences in survey methodology and implementation. Second, even given an achieved, high level of survey-methods standardization, the observed cross-national differences in response rates merely relate to some characteristics associated with countries and “survey climate” is merely one of several plausible explanations for such differences (others being differences in laws, postal systems, and labor-market conditions). Finally, even if the differences could be reasonably related to “survey climate,” and not other country-level variables, that would reveal little until one could specify what mattered under the umbrella of “survey climate”. Survey climate could refer to either to factors closely and directly related to surveys such as confidence in the reliability of survey or acceptance of confidentiality pledges from interviewers or to less immediate factors such as a generalized sense of privacy, trust in people, and norms of cooperation. Until the specifics could be ascertained, “survey climate” would be too broad a concept to be useful from either a theoretical or applied standpoint.

Table 1

Procedures Used to Increase Response

Call-backs	83%*
Left Letters, Booklets, etc.	59%*
Intro Letter/Booklet	45%*
Interviewer Bonuses	45%*
Intro Telephone Call	31%*
Uses Converters	28%*
Incentives to Respondents	26%

*Applies only to face-to-face surveys

n=29-38

Table 2

Use of Incentives Among Surveys Using Incentives

Offered Only Selectively, Not to All	30%
Standard/Same Incentive to All	80%
Incentive is Gift, Never Cash	50%
Incentive Offered/Given at First Contact	56%

n=10

Table 3

**Open-ended Mentions on Face-to-Face Surveys of
“Most Effective Strategies or Tactics for Maximizing Your Response Rate”**

Interviewer Training	11
Respondent Incentives	11
Interview Supervision	6
Experienced Interviewers	5
Shorter Questionnaire	5
Call Backs	4
Leaflets, Hand-outs, Letters	4
Interesting Content of Survey	4
Interviewer Bonuses	4
Time of Contact	3
Advanced Letter	3
Longer Field Period	3
Better Interviewer Pay	2
Calls to Schedule Interviews	2
Other (all mentioned once): Better/Simpler Questions, Using Converters, Reputation of Survey Organization, In-Person Interviews, Good Interviewer Behavior	1

n=29 (totals more than 29 due to multiple mentions)

Table 4

Rated Effectiveness of Various Measures to Increase Response Rates in Face-to-Face Surveys

	% Very Useful
More Experienced Interviewers	72%
More Interviewer Training	45%
Shorter Questionnaires	45%
More Supervision of Interviewers	35%
Letters, Booklets, etc.	31%
Interviewer Bonuses	31%
More Call Backs per Case	29%
Longer Field Periods	28%
Respondent Incentives	28%
Use of Converters	17%

n=29

Table 5

Type of Interviewers (Face-to-Face Surveys)

(% of All Interviewers)

	Full-time Professional	Part-time Professional	Student	Other
None	42.9	19.2	38.5	95.7
1-24%	17.8	11.5	30.7	4.3
25-49%	17.8	11.5	11.5	0.0
50-99%	7.2	34.6	11.5	0.0
100%	14.3	23.1	7.7	0.0

N=29

Table 6

Use of Mixed Modes in Postal Surveys

% Using Telephone to Contact Respondents	38%
% Completing Some Interviews via Telephone	3%
% Using In-Person Visit to Contact Respondents	0%
% Completing Some Interviews In-Person	0%

n=10

Table 7

Areas to Focus Additional Resources On

(% Top Priority)

More Analysis	42
Higher Response Rate	37
Larger Sample Size	29
More Methodological Experiments	18
More Questionnaire Development/ Pretesting	18
Doing More Surveys	16
Longer Survey	5

n=38

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Appendix: ISSP Non-Response Questionnaire

Please answer these questions for the most recent ISSP module you have archived.

Q0. In what country did you do the ISSP? _____

Q1. What is the most recent ISSP module you archived?

Role of Government	1
Work Orientation	2
Other (Please specify)	
_____	3

Q2. Was this module fielded as part of a larger survey or as a study on its own?

NOTE: TWO ISSP MODULES FIELDDED TOGETHER WOULD COUNT AS BEING PART OF A LARGER SURVEY.

Part of a larger survey	1
Stand alone	2

Q3. About how long did the whole survey take, the ISSP questions, the demographics, and any other questions?

_____ minutes

Q4. Were incentives offered to respondents?

Yes	1
No	2 (SKIP TO Q.5)

IF Q4=Yes, Ask:

a. Were incentives offered to all respondents?

Yes	1
No	2

b. When incentives were offered, was a standard incentive offered to all offered an incentive?

Yes	1
No	2

c. What kind of incentives were offered?

COUNT AS GIFTS EVEN THOSE OF TOKEN VALUE, BUT DO NOT COUNT BROCHURES OR BOOKLETS THAT DESCRIBE OR INTRODUCE THE SURVEY OR YOUR ORGANIZATION.

Cash Only	1
Gift Only	2
Cash and Gift	3
Cash or Gift	4

If cash used, ask:

i. When a cash incentive was offered, what was the average amount?
_____ (in local currency)

If gifts used, ask:

ii. When gifts were offered as an incentive, what did you give? Please specify below.

iii. What was the average value of gifts given?
_____ (in local currency)

d. Were incentives offered to everyone or only used selectively, e.g. to help convert refusals?

Offered to all	1
Offered to some	2 (answer d-i)

i. If only offer to some, ask:

Who decides whom is offered an incentive?

Interviewer	1
Interviewer following strict rules	2
Manager/supervisor in the field	3
Survey Director in central office	4
Other (PLEASE SPECIFY) _____	5

e. When were incentives first offered?

To all from the initial contact	1
To all, but only after one or more contacts	2
To some, but only after one or more contacts	3
Other (PLEASE SPECIFY)_____	

_____	4

f. Have you ever done experiments in which different incentives or different amounts were randomly given to different sub-samples?

Yes	1
No	2

Q5. If you had additional resources to devote to data collection, how easy would it be to increase your response rate?

Very easy	1
Somewhat easy	2
Somewhat difficult	3
Very difficult	4

Q6. If you had additional resources to devote to your surveys, which of the following would you spend it on:

	Top Priority	Impor- tant Priority	Modertate Priority	Low Priority
a. More questionnaire development/Pretesting	1	2	3	4
b. Longer surveys	1	2	3	4
c. Larger sample size	1	2	3	4
d. Higher response rate	1	2	3	4
e. More analysis	1	2	3	4
f. More methodological Experiments	1	2	3	4
g. Doing more surveys	1	2	3	4

Q7. What mode was used in this survey?

IF MORE THAN ONE MODE USED, PLEASE INDICATED WHAT WAS USED FOR MOST CASES.

- Face-to-face interview 1
- Face-to-face in part, but ISSP module used
self-completion while interviewer waited 2
- Face-to-face in part, but ISSP module used
self-completion leave behind/drop-off 3
- Postal survey 4 (SKIP TO Q22.)

Q8. Does your organization have its own staff of interviewers and do your own data collection or is data collection done by another organization?

- Have own interviewers/do own data collection 1
- Another organization does data collection 2
- Other (Please describe)_____
- _____
- _____ 3

Q9. How are interviewers paid?

- By the hour 1
- By the completed case 2
- A combination of hourly and by case 3
- Other (Please describe)_____
- _____
- _____ 4

Q10. Did you give bonuses to interviewers for any of the following reasons?

	Yes	No
a. For converting refusals	1	2
b. For meeting a target number of completed case	1	2
c. For taking difficult assignments	1	2
d. For some other reasons	1	2

If AYes@ to d: Please explain on what basis bonuses are given.

Q11. Did you use specially trained or expert interviewers sometimes called converters to work temporary refusals?

Yes, frequently	1
Yes, but not frequently	2
No	3

Q12. Did you mail an introductory letter or booklet to respondents/households before an interviewer attempted initial face-to-face contact?

Yes	1
No	2

Q13. Did you make a telephone call to respondents/households before an interviewer attempted initial face-to-face contact?

Yes, usually	1
Yes, sometimes	2
Yes, but rarely	3
No	4

Q14. Were call backs used to convert temporary refusals, to reach non-contacts, or for both reasons?

For refusal conversion	1
For non-contacts	2
For both reasons	3
Call backs not used	4

Q15. About what proportion of your interviewers were in each of the following categories:

a. Full-time, professional interviewers	_____
b. Part-time, non-student interviewers	_____
c. Student interviewers	_____
d. All other interviewers	_____

Please specify what is covered in d:

Q16. Did you have letters, booklets, or other printed material that you left at households either when no contact was made or to help persuade a temporary refusal to cooperate?

Yes	1
No	2

Q17. Please describe the training that interviewers received to help them in making contact, gaining cooperation, and converting temporary refusals?

Qs. 18 & 19 refer to the ISSP and other major, general-population surveys that you conduct.

Q18. In general, what do you find to be the most effective strategies or tactics for maximizing your response rate?

Q19 According to your experience, in general how effective do you rate the following procedures in helping to achieve a high response rate?

	Very Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not Very Useful	Not at All Useful	Don't Use/Do
a. Respondent incentives	1	2	3	4	8
b. Interviewer bonuses	1	2	3	4	8
c. Longer field periods	1	2	3	4	8
d. More interviewer training	1	2	3	4	8

e. Use of converters	1	2	3	4	8
f. More call backs per case	1	2	3	4	8
g. More supervision of interviewers	1	2	3	4	8
h. Letters, booklets, etc.	1	2	3	4	8
i. Shorter questionnaires	1	2	3	4	8
j. More experienced interviewers	1	2	3	4	8

Q20. Do interviewers complete a contact form or record-of-calls that lists all attempts for each case and the outcome of each attempt?

Yes	1
No	2

Q21. How important do you consider the following approaches are for increasing response rates:

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Somewhat Unimportant	Very Unimportant	Don=t Use
a. Training interviewers to Atailor@ approaches; That is, varying each request to emphasize points that they believe will be most persuasive to each individual respondent	1	2	3	4	5

b. Training interviewers to develop Arapport@ with each respondent; That is, a friendly connection or affinity between each other

1 2 3 4 5

DONE IF FACE-TO-FACE SURVEY

Q22. Please describe each step of your postal survey design. How many mailings did you make? What was sent with each mailing (e.g. questionnaire, reminder postcard, letter)? What amount of time lapsed between each mailing?

Q23. Did you make any phone calls to try and contact respondents and urge them to complete and mail back the questionnaire?

Yes, frequently	1
Yes, sometimes	2
Yes, but rarely	3
No	4

Q24. Did you complete any interviews over the phone?

Yes	1
No	2

Q25. Did you make any in-person visits to try and contact respondents and urge them to complete and mail back the questionnaire?

Yes, frequently	1
Yes, sometimes	2
Yes, but rarely	3
No	4

Q26. Did you complete any interviews in-person?

Yes	1
No	2

DONE IF POSTAL SURVEY